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ABSTRACT

In teaching about religion there is the fundamental distinction between secular history, which is restricted to natural cause and effect relationships, and sacred histories, which assume that a spirit world exists and that human/divine interaction has taken place. In the United States, the academically approved way of dealing with these contradictions has been for public schools to teach secular history while parents and their religious leaders relate their own sacred history. At one time a classroom teacher assumed that the majority of students practiced Christianity. Student bodies today have children from a variety of sacred traditions as well as from non-religious homes. Teaching about religion in the classroom sometimes runs into conflicts between the secular and sacred concepts of history. This publication is designed to help educators deal with attempts to influence public school history and the social studies curricula when teaching about world religions. It is divided into two parts: (1) "Holy Books and History Teaching"; and (2) "Taking Religion Seriously across the Curriculum" (Warren Nord; Charles Haynes). (BT)

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Teaching About Religion in History Classes

Sacred and Secular History

SO 032 352

Brant Abrahamson
Fred Smith

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Brant Abrahamson and Fred Smith are career history and social studies teachers. As they taught, they became deeply frustrated with the deficiencies of standard textbooks, and they began developing alternative materials for their students. Some of their lessons and units have been published by GSP, Tucson, AZ, and The Teachers' Press, Brookfield, IL,

Current publications include *The Decalogue: Bible Scholarship for Use Today, Calendars and Thinking Logically, Thinking Logically: A Study of Common Fallacies, Thinking About the "Mysterious," Thinking About Religion From a Global Perspective, Prejudice in Group Relations, Ways to Influence People,* and *Family Group Living.*

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Introduction

When teaching about religion, an instructor runs head-long into conflicting and emotional-laden understandings of the nature of our world.

There is the fundamental distinction between secular history which is restricted to natural cause and effect relationships and sacred histories which assume that a spirit world exists and that human/Divine interaction has taken place. Members of each religion tradition, in turn, have their own set of faith-centered historical concepts, scriptures and miracle stories.

In the United States, the academically approved way of dealing with these contradictions has been for public schools, in a formal sense, to teach secular history while parents and their religious leaders relay their own group's sacred history. In practice, Christianity has been dominant in the U.S., and its sacred history has been mixed into what is taught as secular history. At the minimum, Christian beliefs have been presented in a more favorable light than those of other faiths. This bias is now being challenged.

First, student bodies are becoming religiously diverse. At one time a teacher could assume that most students (of influential families at least) were Christian to one degree or another. This generalization no longer holds in many districts. In classes often there are children coming from a variety of sacred traditions as well as from non-religious homes.

Attempts, therefore, have been made to remove de facto Christian instruction from public schools, and frequently a Christian backlash has developed. Religious Right groups (primarily) want schools "again" to include much more Christianity.

Their demands would not be so controversial if they only meant increased attention to the contributions Christian organizations have made to American life. If these have been neglected, it's a matter that competent historians can deal with. The issue involves much more. Specifically, it involves conflicts between secular and sacred concepts of history. Some groups want their sacred, miracle-oriented history taught as "things that actually happened."

The essay and book review that follow are designed to help educators deal with these attempts to influence public school history and the social studies curricula as it relates to world religions. Part One is called "Holy Books and History Teaching." Part II reviews *Taking Religion Seriously Across the Curriculum* by Warren Nord and Charles Haynes, especially as it concerns history and social studies classes. Nord and Haynes think they have found a "common ground" upon which educators and religious leaders can agree. They also believe that their proposals--built upon this presumed common ground--will be acceptable to most Americans when "they understand them." We think some flaws in their proposals should be pointed out.

Brant Abrahamson, September, 2000.

Part I: Holy Books and History Teaching

Miracles and Natural Cause and Effect.

In most people's minds, religion involves the supernatural. Religious people in all major faiths believe that a Divine entity, or group of entities, is concerned with people of this earth. Humans, they believe, have received communications from a Divine source in the past, as is shown by the various holy books associated with the world's religions. In addition, they usually believe that they continue to receive Divine "help" in solving their problems; that natural cause and effect relationships can be modified by prayers, meditations, rituals, or ceremonies.

Although they commonly believe that miracles have occurred, religious people usually assume that only those associated with their own faith are real ones. The supernatural beliefs of others are commonly categorized as "superstitions." As Kenneth Woodward states in *The Book of Miracles*:

> "Pentecostal miracles do not count as such for Catholic Christians, just as Catholic miracles of intercession have no meaning for Protestants. Similarly, Muslim miracles are not recognized by Buddhists. Even Hindus...cannot appropriate the miracle stories of a Christian, a Muslim or even a Buddhist saint except as manifestations of what they understand as a universal God-consciousness. And a secularist must...dismiss all miracles out of hand." (*The Book of Miracles;The Meaning of the Miracle Stories in Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam*, Simon & Schuster, 2000, p.383).

Even within a religion, followers almost always have an array of interpretations of their faith's miracle stories. Understandings likely go from uncritical acceptance through a variety of somewhat "natural explanations" to those believers who think the accounts are supernatural only in the sense that they embody Divine moral guidelines. Many believe prayers are answered through natural means. A Divine entity is aware of human supplications but works through the natural order of the universe. Science is accepted, but not as the whole story. Behind it all--or involved in it all--these religious people perceive a spiritual dimension best explained by the religious tradition to which they belong. Many religious scientists are in this category.

There also are large numbers of Americans who reject organized religion but, perhaps rather unthinkingly, assume there are surrounding spirits (or supernatural forces) that can help or hurt them. They may carry "good luck" charms. They may read their horoscope in their daily newspaper. They may believe in lucky numbers or spiritually auspicious days. Such folk-religion "superstitions" are extremely widespread. They are found among people almost regardless of their stated beliefs.

At the secular end are those individuals who reject all supernaturalisms. Generally speaking, only within the last few hundred years have large numbers of people accepted this understanding of reality. Although there were non-believers at least as far back as the ancient Greeks, widespread secularism in the West stems only from about the 1600s. It was at this time that scientists (and allied philosophers) systematically started investigating the world through natural cause and effect alone.

The idea that governments can rule effectively apart from the presumed aid (and wrath) of some Divine entity is also a recent phenomenon. The Constitution of the United States--which does not mention God--is the first of its kind. Article VI ends with the statement that "...no religious Test shall ever be required as a Qualification to any office or public Trust under the United States." And, the First Amendment extends secularism in American government farther by stating that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof..."

The Sacred and Secular in U. S. Public Schools.

Most people accept the idea that sacred history, especially miracle stories associated with one faith, are "off limits" in U.S. schools. There has been an understanding that a community's schools are places to learn about the natural causes of things. Young people, it's assumed, should acquire their faith group's spiritual world view--and associated miracle stories--from their parents and religious leaders. If these moral guardians want their children to attend classes where supernatural concepts are presented as fact, they've sent them to religious-oriented private schools or have used home-schooling.

Children from miracle-oriented homes who attend public schools, therefore, learn two quite different views of history, a secular one in school and a sacred one outside of school. As they mature, they make decisions about how to deal with these different and conflicting "sources of truth" as have generations before them.

This general understanding that public schools should restrict themselves to natural cause and effect understandings is NOT being challenged in regard to folk-religion "superstitions." Rather, one often hears that schools do not do enough to teach students how to avoid the attractions of palm-readers, astrologers, fortune-tellers and the like. Further, using books with stories featuring witches, fairies and other kinds of magical phenomena often are condemned. Public schools, we are told, should not encourage "supernatural" beliefs or promote "New Age Religion" among students.

At the same time, some of these same people condemn schools for "ignoring religion," especially the rather fundamentalist forms of Christianity. One way to put "religion back into schools" is through student initiatives. Young people have the Constitutional right to practice their faith, and they have been quite inventive in this regard.

In recent years there have been student-led morning prayers around school flag poles as well as students testifying to their Christian faith when making announcements and when speaking at award ceremonies. In various communities they are now using the Ten Commandment book covers furnished by religious groups.

Like-minded community leaders--including school administrators--often informally support these efforts even though they cannot officially endorse them. In addition, school leaders--sometimes encouraged by state officials--have placed versions of the Ten Commandments in their school's hallways or classrooms. One "justification" is that the Decalogue is a historical document much like the Mayflower compact or Magna Charta. Or, they may post the motto, "In God We Trust" since this is a slogan that was placed on some American coins beginning in the mid-1800s.

These initiatives do not go nearly far enough in the views of some "put religion back into schools" proponents. Warren Nord and Charles Haynes, for instance, want creationism taught and much more besides. They believe that "school prayers, devotionals, and Bible reading" are only the "ceremonial husk of religion." They urge schools to present sacred (especially Christian) historical understanding of history to students along side traditional secular (natural cause and effect) histories.[1]

This demand is most troublesome when students study about the origins of the world religions and the lives of their founders. Here there are dramatic conflicts between believer viewpoints and what historians outside the religion say likely happened.

The Origins of World Religions: Sacred and Secular Understanding

The vividly detailed sacred stories of how any one of the world religions came into being are quite troublesome for secular historians[2] for a variety of reasons.

First, believers attribute their origins to Divine intervention which secular historians must reject. It would be illogical for historians to imply factual verification of Heavenly signs, miraculous events, or supernatural events that supersede natural cause and effect.

Even when Godly interventions are set to one side, the holy book accounts are very problematic. In all cases, the stories were transmitted orally for decades--sometimes centuries--before they were written down. That is, the accounts were first put in writing by people who lived at least a couple of generations after the events they are

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1 *Taking Religion Seriously Across the Curriculum*, p. 7.

2 We recognize that secular historians have multiple philosophical orientations, and they often disagree vehemently one with another. These disagreements now are so intense that a new professional organization-the Historical Society-is being organized to challenge existing professional groups. This secular conflict, however, is beyond the scope of our essay.

describing. In modern terms this is "hearsay evidence." It needs to be treated skeptically and subjected to the verification standards of factual information. Even after the first writings appeared, the accounts evolved, sometimes over centuries, before the current holy book versions "solidified." And, all of this happened before modern concepts of factual history came into existence. When the holy books of the world's religions were created, the chief goal was to influence behavior. These accounts often included versions of "things that actually happened," but "objective reporting" in a modern sense was lacking.

The origins of Judaism as described in the Torah is one example. Based upon information found in this holy book, Moses lived at least 3200 years ago, but our information about him does not come from that time period. The Israelites had no written language at the time, and nothing about a "Moses" person as related in the Torah has been found in Egyptian materials despite diligent searches. The Israelites relied upon oral traditions--memorization--as a means of preserving their cultural history. Karen Armstrong summarizes the consensus of many academic historians when she says:

> The biblical account [of Moses] was written down centuries later, however, in about the eighth century B.C.E., though it certainly drew on earlier narrative sources. During the nineteenth century, some German biblical scholars developed a critical method which discerned four different sources in the first five books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. These were later collated into the final text of what we know as the Pentateuch [or Torah] during the fifth century B.C.E. (*A History of God*, p. 12)

When reading this section of the Bible, people are securing their understanding of Moses from information that was the result of more than 500 years of development.

The Origins of Taoism. The same general situation exists in regard to the origins of other world religions. Rhoads Murphey, a historian of south and east Asia, says this about the origins of Taoism:

> The chief text of Taoism, the Tao te Ching ("Classic of the Way"), is a cryptic collection of mystical remarks whose meaning even in Chinese is unclear, let alone their meaning in many hundreds of Western translations....Much of its content is attributed to a contemporary of Confucius' known simply as Lao Tze (Laozi, "The Old One'), although the present text is not older than the third century B.C. and was probably compiled by several hands." (*A History of Asia*, p. 79)

Briefly stated, Taoism emerged over a period of several centuries after Lao Tze is said to have lived. Moreover, this early literature has no accounts of the life of Lao Tze. These first appear in Chinese written records even later. From a secular historian's standpoint, therefore, Lao Tze is in much the same category as is Moses. It's possible

that the accounts written centuries later are roughly based on the life of real people, but, for the secular historian, evidence is lacking.

Buddhism. Siddhartha Gautama is a better established historical figure than Lao Tze. A. L. Basham says that there are a few things about his life are "reasonably certain."

> He was the son of a chief of the Sakyas, a small tribe of the Himalayan foothills. He became an ascetic, and propounded a new doctrine which gained the support of numerous disciples. After many years of teaching in the kingdoms of Kosala and Magadha and in the tribal lands to the north of the Ganges, he died at the age of eighty at some time between the years of 486 and 473 B.C..." (*The Wonder that was India*,pp. 256-257.)

All else, though, is sacred history.

Christianity. From a non-Christian perspective, little is known about the life of Jesus. Almost no information exists outside of sacred Christian literature. The Romans--who controlled Palestine during the time of Jesus--were very interested in recording their own history. Except for the Chinese, we have much better documentation of Roman life at the time of Jesus than for any other ancient people. Nonetheless, Roman historians say almost nothing about Jesus. As a consequence, a few modern authorities such as Robert Price even claim that "Jesus had no more historical basis than Osiris" and that "the Galilean rabbi and healer of the Gospels is the result of the early Christian imagination.... " This is an extreme view.[1]

Islam. Muhammad is the most recent of the major world religion founders. He lived from the late 500s C.E. into the early 600s. And, high school history text authors almost always write as if his life's story is well documented. It is not. Common textbook descriptions of Muhammad come from Islamic sacred literature. In *The Origins of the Koran* , Ibn Warraq describes Muhammad and the beginnings of the Islam very differently than what one finds in school books.

In the early 600s C.E. Jerusalem and surrounding areas were a part of the Christian East Roman, or Byzantine, empire. Constantinople (now Istanbul) was the capital. In

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1 "Of Myth and Men," *Free Inquiry*, Winter, 1999/00, p. 29. Price also lists some of the interpretations of Jesus made by modern writers. For instance, John P. Meier describes Jesus as a "marginal Jew." John Dominic Crossan's 500 page book on *The Historical Jesus* has this subtitle: *The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant*. Jesus is described as a revolutionary in books written by S. G. F. Brandon and Robert Eisenman. Morton Smith sees Jesus as a folk magician. In a variation on this theme, Stevan Davies and Gaetano Salomone describe him as a shaman. Barbara Thiering argues that he was a Qumran Essene monk-like person, while Gerald Downing and Burton Mack seem convinced he was a Cynic-like sage. Price was a member of the Jesus Seminar which met twice a year to determine what--from a secular historian's perspective--could be known about the historical Jesus. In all, about 200 Biblical scholars participated in the effort. The group summarized its findings in the 1993 book called *The Five Gospels*.

634 C.E. the armies of the Byzantine empire were defeated by southern desert warriors in a battle near Jerusalem.

These warriors were united by a Jewish-like religion that was quite similar to the Samaritan religion.[1] Like the Samaritans who lived north of Jerusalem, they followed the Torah but not the rest of the Jewish Scripture. Specifically, they considered themselves to be descendants of Abraham through his mistress, Hagar, and their son Ishmael. When they took control of Jerusalem in 634 C.E., they claimed they were securing their "Promised Land" like the followers of Moses (according to Biblical accounts). They even had twelve divisions--or tribes--patterning themselves after the ancient Israelites.

Their Jewish-like beliefs probably helped them secure control of Jerusalem after the battle mentioned above. Many Jews living in the city hated their Christian rulers, and they apparently looked upon the conquerors as liberators. Some even hoped the new rulers would help them rebuild their temple that had been destroyed by the Romans 500 years earlier. These hopes proved unfounded.

Instead of joining with the Jews and rebuilding the Jewish temple, the conquerors built the Dome of the Rock. Moreover, they began borrowing ideas from their Christian subjects. For example, they accepted Jesus as a prophet equal to Moses (although they rejected the idea that he was a savior or had arisen from the dead).

These new rulers would later be called Muslims, and Muhammad eventually would be honored as their prophet. Within a hundred or so years they also would develop the Koran as their holy book (like the Gospels that their Christian subjects had). None of these elements existed in 634 C.E. however.

Greek and other writers at the time called these conquerors Ishmaelites, or Hagarites. They called their religion Hagarism, among other designations. Muhammad was not their leader. When first mentioned in Islamic literature, Muhammad is portrayed as a John-the-Baptist kind of person. He is described as a prophetic messenger for Omar, the first Arab ruler of Jerusalem. Omar, in turn, is called the "messiah." Mecca was not their chief holy city either. The first mosques had worshipers facing Jerusalem when they prayed, not Mecca. The Koran did not emerge for another 100 years.

In a manner similar to other faiths, Muslims believe that their founder was a Divine messenger, and that his actual words were faithfully transmitted orally until they found

[1] The Samaritans lived north of Jerusalem in central Palestine,. They generally are thought to have been descendants of people "planted in Samaria by the Assyrian kings, in about 722 B.C.E" when the Kingdom of Israel was destroyed. The warriors from south of Jerusalem were like the Samaritans in many ways--probably had borrowed ideas from them. For example, the Samaritans used the Torah as their holy book "which was considered the sole source and standard for faith and conduct." And, the "formula 'There is no God but the One' is an ever-recurring refrain in Samaritan liturgies. A constant theme in their literature is the unity of God and His absolute holiness and righteousness." (Warraq, p. 31)

their way into the Koran. Non-Muslim historians say the Islamic religion emerged through an extended historical process like all other major historical movements.

Muhammad almost certainly was a real person who probably was born somewhere south and east of Jerusalem. In all likelihood, he was a merchant to whom "something" may have happened around 622 C.E. Likely he also took part in various battles, maybe leading some. It's also possible he lived longer than is commonly recognized and participated in the battle for Jerusalem. But, this is speculation.

The detailed stories of Muhammad's life including the Divine revelations Muslims believe he received began to take shape in the very late 600's, long after his generation had died. And, they become more elaborate as time passed. Warraq says that "...if one storyteller [perhaps in the 600s] should happen to mention a raid, the next one [in the 700s] would tell you the exact date of this raid, and the third one [in the 800s] would furnish you with even more details."[1] The word *Islam* itself first appears in 691 (at the Dome of the Rock). It is not found again for another 100 years.

Ending Thoughts. Does this non-Muslim account mean that sacred historical Islamic traditions are inaccurate? Are the holy books of other religions "wrong"? Not if one is a member of faith involved. At the very least, followers will see their Scriptures as providing Divine moral guidance. And, there will be many who believe that the miracles happened as described. Consider birth stories. A follower may or may not believe that their founding Divine messenger was in his mother's womb for more than 60 years (Taoism), or that his father was a white elephant (Buddhism), or that his mother did not have sex before he was born (Christianity). With or without the miracles, these holy book stories are far removed from secular history.

Nonetheless, many believers want to know as much as possible about how their Scriptures came into being from a secular perspective. For them, historical analysis is desirable and has no relationship to Divine inspiration. Generally, the historical experts are themselves members of the religion whose origins they are investigating. We need to remember that all world religions were, in the beginning, based upon oral communication. There were no holy books. These gradually emerged through human minds and hands which, if one is a believer, were divinely inspired. The inspiration remains regardless of when, how or through whom the inspiration came.

Because of these factors, one might assume that world history text authors would carefully separate sacred and non-sacred accounts of the origins of the world religions. However, they almost almost never make this distinction in a way that high school students (or maybe even their teachers) will understand.

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[1] Warraq, *The Origins of the Koran*, p. 33.

Sacred and Secular History in World History Texts.

No world history text of which we are aware clearly distinguishes between sacred and secular history when describing the origins of the world faith systems. Stories taken from holy books are blurred into secular descriptions. The degree of blurring almost always is related to the dominance of the faith in the textbook sales area. Since Christianity is the major faith in the United States, Bible stories are woven into world history much more than are those of other faiths.

These are Bible story examples from World *History: Patterns of Interaction*, a text first published by McDougal Littell in 1999.

> The Bible says the Hebrews, migrated to Egypt because of a drought and threat of a famine. At first, the Hebrews were given places of honor in the Egyptian Kingdom. Later, however, they were forced into slavery, their lives made "bitter with hard service, in mortar and brick, and in all kinds of work in the field." (p. 73)

"The Life and Teachings of Jesus" section does not even start with a "Bible says" qualifier.

> Jesus was born in the town of Bethlehem in Judea. The date is uncertain but is thought to have been around 6 to 4 B.C. Jesus was both a Jew and a Roman subject. He was raised in the village of Nazareth in northern Palestine. Jesus was baptized by the prophet known as John the Baptist. As a young man, he took up the trade of carpentry.
>
> Jesus' Message. At the age of 30 Jesus began his public ministry. For the next three years, he preached, taught, did good works, and reportedly performed miracles. [Note how the "miracles" idea is qualified.]

The same general formula is used when discussing origins of other world religions, but with less detail. In the text only the origins of Hinduism avoid sacred/secular confusion. One reason almost certainly relates to the nature of the faith itself. Hindus do not try to pinpoint any specific earthly time or place for the beginnings of their beliefs. Also, the number of Hindu families in most school districts is quite small.

Characteristics of Oral Traditions

In all world religions the "words" of the founding Divine messenger were transmitted orally for decades (sometimes centuries) before they were written down. Therefore, history teachers need to know something about the nature of orally-transmitted information. The following description comes "Orality and memory" found in *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus*. This 1993 book is the work of dozens of Biblical scholars associated with The Jesus Seminar. The authors are concerned with the words attributed to Jesus, but their generalizations are true of the

founders of Judaism, Taoism, Buddhism and Islam as well. Even as described in the religious holy books, all of the founders taught their disciples orally, and--in turn--these disciples taught their followers in an oral manner.

The authors of *The Five Gospels* say that Jesus's disciples "responded to his teaching orally: they repeated his most memorable words to one another and to outsiders." In the process, they "adapted Jesus' words to new situations, improvising and inventing as the occasion demanded."

> Transmitters of oral tradition do not ordinarily remember the exact wording of the saying or parable they are attempting to quote. They normally have no written records to which they can refer, and the versions they themselves had heard varied from occasion to occasion....Passing oral lore along is much like telling and retelling a joke: we can perhaps recall the organization of the joke, along with most or all of the punchline, but we rarely remember and retell it precisely as we heard it the first time or even as we ourselves told it on previous occasions....
>
> We know that the oral memory best retains sayings and anecdotes that are short, provocative, memorable--and often-repeated. Indeed, the oral memory retains little else....Short-term memory is able to retain only about seven items at a time; beyond that point, items in short-term memory must either be transferred to long-term memory or those contents are lost. Further experiments have demonstrated that we grasp the essence or the *gist* of what we hear or read, relate that gist to knowledge previously acquired, and then store the new information in long-term memory in previously acquired categories. One experiment has shown that most people forget the exact wording of a particular statement after only sixteen syllables intervene between the original statement and the request to recall the wording. But the same experiment has proved that most people are quite good at recalling the gist of what was said or heard.
>
> Storytellers in every age freely invent words for characters in their stories. This is the storyteller's license....In inventing lines for Jesus to speak, the evangelists were only following common practice. Occasional dialogue in short stories in the gospels should not be considered direct quotation. (pp. 27-30)

Using Holy Books in History Classes.

History teachers commonly are told that students should read original documents. When holy books are being considered, however, caution is needed.

Any holy book is, in believers' eyes, a miracle in writing. They think all or some of its contents come from a Divine source. This feeling of Divine origins may be so strong that even the book itself is handled in a reverent manner. A teacher unfamiliar this possibility may be disrespectful without even realizing it.

Secondly, how does one handle material that includes accounts of miracles, "divine signs" and stories of heavenly help when there may be little agreement on how these should be interpreted even within the faith? Members of the class who belong to the religion may not even be in agreement. Or, suppose a secular approach is used. The instructor has students read the material as they would a Greek myth. Isn't this procedure likely to be highly offensive to the student believers--or their families--even if the family understanding also is given?

Studying the material "as is" and letting students decide what it means is problematic too. Adolescents have not attended theological schools, and they likely will interpret the stories in a very literal manner. If the holy book is from a religion different than their own, they probably will make fun of the "superstitions" mentally if not openly. Or, they may acquire false impressions of what members of the faith actually believe since many almost certainly will interpret their holy literature in non-literal ways.

Asking students to interpret their own sacred literature for their classmates is questionable also. They may know little more about the selection than do their peers, and often they are placed in an embarrassing position. Do they admit ignorance? ...Make something up? If this procedure is used, students need the selection ahead of time so that they can consult with their religious leaders. And since there are so many divisions within faiths, they should preface their remarks by stating exactly what faith group they belong to. Then, they should begin by saying, "According to my understanding after consulting with _____, we believe that...." Teachers who are within the faith tradition and lecture on the Scripture's "meaning" should follow the same rules. It is very easy to slip into a proselytizing mode without, perhaps, even being aware of it.

Addenda

Mircea Eliade provides an example from this century illustrating how supernatural stories can arise. This selection comes from *Cosmos and History* published by Harper & Brothers in 1954, pages 44-46. *Cosmos and History* is Willard Trask's English translation of *Le Mythe di l'e'ternel retour*, (Paris, Librairie Gallimard, 1949).

> ...the recollection of a historical event or a real personage survives in popular memory for two or three centuries at the utmost. This is because popular memory finds difficulty in retaining individual events and real figures. The structures by means of which it functions are different: categories instead of events, [stereotypes, not real people.]
>
> .....
>
> Sometimes. . . an investigator chances to come upon the actual transformation of an event into myth. Just before the last war, the Romanian folklorist, Constantin Brailoiu had occasion to record an admirable ballad in a village in Maramures. Its subject was a tragedy of love: the young suitor had been

> bewitched by a mountain fairy, and a few days before he was to be married, the fairy, driven by jealousy, had flung him from a cliff. . . .In the course of recording the variants that he was able to collect, the folklorist tried to learn the period when the tragedy had occurred; he was told that it was a very old story, which had happened "long ago." Pursuing his inquiries, however, he learned that the event had taken place not quite forty years earlier. He finally even discovered that the heroine was still alive. He went to see her and heard the story from her own lips. It was a quite commonplace tragedy: one evening her lover had slipped and fallen over a cliff; he had not died instantly; his cries had been heard by mountaineers; he had been carried to the village where he had died soon after. At the funeral, his fiancee, with the other women in the village, had repeated the customary ritual lamentations, without the slightest allusion to the mountain fairy.
>
> Thus, despite the presence of the principal witness, a few years had sufficed to strip the event of all historical authenticity, to transform it into a legendary tale. . . When the folklorist drew the villagers' attention to the authentic version, they replied that the old woman had forgotten; that her great grief had almost destroyed her mind.

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Part II: "Taking Religion Seriously" in History and the Social Studies

Introduction. In 1998 the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) published a 220 page book written by Warren Nord and Charles Haynes entitled *Taking Religion Seriously Across the Curriculum.*

Warren Nord is a philosophy professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and he directs the university's Program in the Humanities and Human Values. Charles Haynes heads The Freedom Forum First Amendment Center that's associated with Vanderbilt University. Both actively publicize their proposals for "teaching about religion" in the nation's public schools in a variety of publications, teacher institutes and convention appearances. Their publisher, ASCD is one of the nation's largest and most influential educational organizations that focuses on precollege education. Its paperback books--such as *Taking Religion Seriously* --are received by tens of thousands of educators across the United States and beyond.

Given the authors' high profile and the wide distribution of their book, it is important for history and social studies teachers to know what's being recommended as the proposals relate to their courses. Specifically, what frames of reference do Nord and Haynes use? What are their guiding assumptions? What curriculum changes do they want for history and social studies? Are these suggestions legal, viable and desirable?

Readers are told on the back cover of *Taking Religion Seriously* that "Warren A. Nord and Charles C. Haynes chart a middle course in our culture wars over religion and public education--one that builds on the developing national consensus among educational and religious leaders." Do they?

The Perspectives of Nord and Haynes.

Nord and Haynes tend to structure their arguments in dualistic ways.

They argue that there are two fundamentally different methods of looking at the world, a secular way and a religious way. They call these two perspectives "conceptual nets." Students are indoctrinated, not educated, if teachers use only a secular disciplinary net. Education, they say, means teaching subjects (not disciplines) that provide for conceptual net choices. To be educated, therefore, Nord and Haynes believe students must be taught about religious perspectives in their public school classes. (pp. 41-44)

To determine which religious beliefs public school educators are to relay to students, Nord and Haynes use what they call the "'Principle of Cultural Location and Weight.'"

> Teachers and texts are obligated to locate their positions on the map of alternatives, indicating what weight their views carry in their own discipline and <u>in the larger culture</u>. Good teachers and texts should not convey to students the idea that there is only one way of thinking about a subject...." (p. 49, our underlining)

The "larger culture" apparently is the United States. Since Christianity is the dominant faith in the country, the "secular net" in any class should be balanced by Christian perspectives. Specifically, Nord and Haynes propose that instruction about religion--mostly Christianity--should be put into school curricula beginning in the lower grades and extending through high school. There should be repeated studies of the Bible as Christian Scripture. In addition, in courses where there is religious/secular conflict, Nord and Haynes say both sides need to be presented objectively with students deciding where truth lies. "Students can only think and act reasonably when they know something about the alternatives; indeed we usually believe that the truth is most likely to be found when we hear both sides of the story, not one side only." (p. 43)

One also needs to be aware of the authors' chief concerns. Nord and Haynes see a disastrous moral slide in the nation. They assert that "...we are losing our ability to speak meaningfully about virtue and duty, love and self-sacrifice, community and justice." (p. 198) The last chapter of their book is called "Moral Education." Morality, for them, comes from religion. "No doubt religion continues to provide the (ultimate) conceptions of morality and justice for much of our politics..." (p. 102) And clearly, Nord and Haynes think students need large, continued doses.

> [Students] must have some understanding of the moral frameworks civilization provides for making sense of the moral dimension of life. After all, morality is not intellectually free-floating. (p.185)
>
> By studying the Bible (or any religious text), students will encounter a vocabulary and framework for thinking about morality and the human condition that will quite properly provide them with critical distance on the secular ideas and ideals they acquire from elsewhere in the curriculum--and from popular culture.
>
> Morality is at the heart of all religion, and...one important reason for studying religion is to acquire some sense of the answers that have been given to the fundamental existential questions of life. Teachers and texts can't endorse religious answers..., but they can and should expose students to them fairly as part of a good liberal--and moral--education. Students may find those answers compelling even if their teachers and texts don't require them to. (p.190)

Christianity, however, comes in multiple forms. What kinds would Nord and Haynes present to students? To answer, they set up another bifurcated categorization. They argue that, basically, there are two kinds of religion, "conservative" and "liberal."

> By the end of the 19th century deep divisions had appeared within Christianity and Judaism between "conservatives" who wished to maintain theological orthodoxies grounded in Scripture or tradition, and "liberals" who believed that religion could be progressive as theologians used modern scholarship to rethink and reform their own traditions....the culture war between conservatives and liberals has submerged denominational differences to a striking extent. (p. 5)

These, then, are the two kinds of Christianity Nord and Haynes discuss and want taught. However, they are most concerned that conservative people's concepts be included in classes when their beliefs differ from those found in secular disciplines.

Here Nord and Haynes are speaking of science, but the basic principles apply to other classes as well. History and the social studies are based upon natural cause/effect relationships as is science, not some group's view of Divinely received knowledge.

> ...there are ways of reconciling modern science and much liberal religion. It is not at all clear, however, how conservative religious claims about origins and nature can be reconciled with science. Should our position be that it is permissible to teach scientific ways of understanding origins and nature that conflict with conservative religion as long as they are reconciled with liberal religion? Is this neutral among religions--as the Establishment Clause requires? Obviously not. (p. 154)

To further justify their program, Nord and Haynes claim it will help students acquire a liberal education as well as provide them with increased critical thinking opportunities.

> A good liberal education will map the relationships of alternative ways of thinking about the subjects of the curriculum--and the world more generally....If understanding different religions from the inside is the necessary first step, the second step should be...to discuss how they relate to one another and to the secular ways of thinking about the world that pervade the curriculum. The point is to nurture some small measure of critical thinking. (p. 52)

History and Social Studies.

Nord and Haynes believe that history and social studies teachers should present conservative Christian understandings whenever the subject matter touches upon some aspect of what they call the nation's "cultural wars." "When we [Americans] agree with each other we teach the importance and rightness of those consensus values. When we disagree, we teach about the alternatives and withhold judgment." (p.186)

First we'll look at what they say about world history classes. Then we'll examine their prescriptions for civics and economics, the two social studies with which they deal.

<u>World History Classes</u>. Nord and Haynes look closely at how Jesus is presented in world history classes. In general, they see Jesus as receiving far too little coverage, and they are especially disturbed that the religious dimensions of his life as understood by conservative Christians (miracle-laden sacred history) are largely ignored. After examining several unnamed world history texts they say:

> In the space Jesus is given, most texts say something about love and forgiveness, but little or nothing about the fact that Christians see Jesus as God incarnate.

> There is little discussion of the nature of sin and salvation, the coming of the Kingdom, the significance of the Resurrection story, or other key Christian teachings and experiences contained in the New Testament. Without some understanding of these concepts, many subsequent developments in Western civilization make little sense. (p. 89)

Nord and Haynes are not enthusiastic about teaching the Bible as history, however. "Students might study the Bible for the light it throws on ancient history. [However, what] we can learn about history from the Bible depends on how we interpret it and the criteria we use to assess the validity of historical claims--both matters of considerable controversy." (p. 167) Nord and Haynes believe that studying the Bible as Scripture is much more important.

> It is through the Biblical account of the Creation, God's covenant with Abraham, the moral radicalism of the Hebrew Prophets, Jesus' teaching of love and the coming Kingdom of God, and his death and resurrection, that Jews and Christians have acquired their understanding of reality. To not appreciate the *religious* roots of civilization with all of the theological, moral, social, political, and scientific branches that are nourished by them is to remain uneducated. (pp. 167-8)

The most obvious question is this: How can one teach the Bible as Scripture in a country where church and state must remain separate? For Nord and Haynes the key is <u>how the material is studied,</u> not the time that is spent on it. They apparently believe a school district can almost immerse students in Bible study as long as the Bible is discussed as the basis for a belief system that is relevant to the subject matter being studied. It "is not a matter of reading it devotionally, but learning about how the Bible has been understood as Scripture within various traditions." (p. 168)

Could a community that is largely made up of non-Christians--Buddhists, for instance--substitute their own sutras for the Bible? ...study the life of Siddhartha Gautama? Perhaps. It would depend on how much weight local beliefs are given in the "Principle of Cultural Location and Weight." Nord and Haynes also say that <u>any</u> major world religion provides a better grasp of reality than secular philosophies do. In the following quote they refer to science, but history and social studies courses in public schools also are based upon natural cause and effect.

> ...the traditional major world religions--Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism...each...discerns a richer reality than does modern science. Ultimate Reality (be it God or Brahman or Nirvana or the Tao) can't be grasped in scientific categories, expressed in scientific language, or analyzed in scientific laboratories. (p. 4)

<u>Civics Classes</u>. In schools influenced by Nord and Haynes, students in civics classes apparently will spend a significant amount of their time discussing church-state

relations. The authors seem to see the current "wall of separation" policies as an end-point on a continuum with theocracy being at the other end. Following debate-style presentations, students--thinking critically--determine if the United States should maintain the current separations or move toward more religious/political intertwining.

The authors clearly prefer the latter course. They quote extensively from John Winthrop's "famous sermon onboard the Arabella" which is a justification for the Massachusetts Bay Colony's theocratic government. They end their Winthrop paragraph this way: "One hundred fifty-seven years later, when the Framers explained the authority of the Constitution...[they] failed to mention God at any point in their document"--almost as if this were an oversight. (p. 99)

This line of thinking continues: "Until the 18th century, most people in the West believed that the authority of government was grounded in religion [but] in the 17th and 18th centuries a new view of government began to develop." People came to believe that governmental power "derived from the consent of the governed." (p.100)

After discussing reasons for this change, Nord and Haynes say that "It is important that students understand the traditional religious conception of government" and that "from the very beginning there has been much disagreement about how much 'separation' the First Amendment's Establishment Clause requires."

> Dissenting voices on the Court (including the current Chief Justice) take what is sometimes called an "accommodationist" view.... [This view] does not prohibit general acknowledgment of religion by government...or allowing religious groups to receive governmental funding on the same basis as secular groups (through vouchers for religious schools, for example)....[Many religious conservatives] "see the separationist position in its strictest applications as hostile to religion and religious expression." (p. 101, our underlining)

Nord and Haynes say that within "virtually all religious traditions allegiance to God takes precedence over allegiance to the state, and patriotism is in constant danger of becoming a kind of idolatry....Through civics classes schools place a powerful emphasis on making students good citizens and good Americans; it is also tremendously important that students appreciate the widespread religious concern about nurturing an uncritical allegiance to the state." (page 103)

Economics Classes. Nord and Haynes express shock that the National Content Standards in Economics "never use moral or religious language, [or] require students to understand anything about morality or religion." This, they feel, is a terrible situation. Understanding the importance of work is one example: "From within all religious traditions, work must be understood in moral and spiritual as well as economic terms...[It's] a way in which we fulfill our obligations to God by using our talents for the good of humanity." (p. 111) As a result:

> No longer do most people understand themselves as living in a "vale of suffering" with their eyes fixed on the spiritual goods of the world to come; rather, they have tasted the goods of the marketplace, found them good, and are, as a result, ever more focused on the "pursuit of happiness" in the world at hand. To some considerable extent the goals of the economic system have usurped the role of religion in shaping our lives and our culture.... (p. 108)

As in history and civics, Nord and Haynes recommend that a religious perspective be inserted into public school courses in economics.

> To be liberally educated, students must learn something about religious as well as secular ways of thinking about economics; if they are to receive an education that is religiously neutral they cannot be taught uncritically to think about economics in exclusively secular ways that, in effect, marginalize the religious alternatives. (p. 113)

Other Suggestions: In addition to these massive injections of religious content into established history and social science courses, Nord and Haynes want schools to have a required course on world religions as well as a "moral capstone course." Here high school seniors would "learn about the most important moral frameworks of thought--secular and religious, historical and contemporary--and how such frameworks might shape their thinking about the most urgent moral controversies they face." (p. 186) In their book, however, it is interesting to note all of the information on non-Christian religions probably would fit on two or three pages.

Summary and Comments.

Nord and Haynes see an overwhelming moral breakdown caused in part by public schools that have "intellectually and culturally" marginalized religion. (p. 42) As a remedy, they propose dramatic infusions of instruction in religion--mostly Christianity--from grade school through high school. These infusions will, in their view, establish some sort of a religious/secular balance within a particular public school system and within individual classrooms where there is secular and conservative Christian conflict.

What is one to make of these proposals?

One overwhelming question concerns legality. Despite disclaimers, inconsistencies, and scattered notes on other religions, Nord and Haynes basically want public schools to present Christian--often Religious Right--theological positions, moral beliefs and miracle-laden historical interpretations as "truths" students should seriously consider.

A thought experiment may help evaluate these ideas. Consider a district with a large Muslim majority. Would any court "okay" a public school curriculum if children are to be exposed to the Koran in the same way as Nord and Haynes propose exposure to the Bible? ...a school system where teachers focus on Muhammad as Nord and

Haynes recommend a study of Jesus? ...where Islamic concepts of theocratic government are presented "objectively" in civics classes? ...where economic values from this faith are described so students can "learn about the alternatives"? Would the program be legal assuming the Koran is not read "devotionally," no Islamic prayers are said and no overt attempts are made to convert minority Christian children? The answer is almost self-evident. One form of religious training is repeated exposure. Proselytizing comes in multiple forms.

Putting these massive legal issues to one side, consider other problems.

Will deeply religious parents want their holy books and theological beliefs analyzed from a non-believer's perspective--which Nord and Haynes agree would have to be done if they are used in public school classes? (See p. 82) Is it likely that these parents will want miracles central to their faith examined in a secular way?

Is it likely that these or any parents will want the miracles and theological beliefs of <u>other</u> religions presented to their children as ideas equally worthy of serious consideration? How exactly does "serious consideration" differ from proselytizing? One doesn't need a thought experiment here. Public schools even now are sometimes condemned because they've used "magical happening" stories and student relaxation procedures that various groups see as elements of "New Age Religion."

Nord and Haynes tell teachers to be sensitive to the situation of children from minority religion homes, but they give minimal attention to the impact their own proposals would have on these students. As now organized, public schools provide a sort of neutral zone. What might happen to the minority religion and non-religious children if their school really took religion seriously in the Christian-oriented ways that Nord and Haynes propose?

Divisions exist within the American society on a number of issues, including religion. Public school children, however, have been somewhat immune from these adult struggles because schools have maintained a mostly non-religious focus. Children receive their religious training elsewhere.

The system works. As they reach adulthood, today's adolescents, like generations before them, gradually decide how to respond to the conflicting life philosophies that swirl around them. If they secure a firm secular understanding in their schools and whatever religious training their families think they need <u>from believers outside of school,</u> they will have the conceptual net alternatives that Nord and Haynes are so worried about.

Yes, young people are likely helped if they are exposed to a variety of life perspectives as they near adulthood. So, having senior courses in world religions and moral perspectives is not very controversial. But Nord and Haynes are talking about much

more than this. They want children confronted with deeply divisive secular/religious conflicts in class after class from a young age onward.

Teachers do ask students to think through conflicting ideas on specific issues such as capital punishment, abortion and sexual orientation within a secular framework. And, the beliefs of various religious groups often are presented as data to be taken into consideration. However, Nord and Haynes want children to debate the religious and secular frameworks themselves. This is not a proposal that has widespread support. Parents and others may be disturbed by a school's academic failings, but few people are clamoring for young people to be involved in religious/secular debates "across the curriculum." Most people outside of the Religious Right seem relatively satisfied with the current "wall of separation" arrangements.

How much sense do the Nord-Haynes arguments make anyway? Why are teachers "obligated to locate their positions on the map of alternatives" when these alternatives may contradict basic disciplinary concepts that they have been hired to teach? Asserting that one should teach two-net "subjects" as opposed to one-net secular disciplines--is disingenuous. As one example, should folk-religion beliefs in magical practices, ghosts and other wide-spread "superstitions" be presented without scrutiny by a sociology teacher who is attempting to get students to think logically?

Furthermore, their analytical structure is based upon dualistic thinking, commonly recognized as a fallacious way of analyzing complex issues. They see the world as a contest between secularism and religion. They reduce religious complexities to a liberal/conservative dichotomy. They artificially contrast subjects with disciplines as well as education with indoctrination. Then, they demand "balance" between opposing sides and debate-style formats through which students make either/or decisions.

Warren Nord and Charles Haynes seem to believe their proposals for sweeping educational change represent some sort of "common ground." They claim that "over the last decade a fairly broad consensus about the role of religion in the public schools has developed at the national level among the leadership of many religious and education organizations." Further, they say "the great majority of Americans would accept the basic principles underlying the consensus...if they understood them." And, they claim that it's been their goal to "build on the principles that ground the consensus." (pp. 9 &10) Even if legal, we doubt that they have found an intellectual "common ground" or that their program will be acceptable to the "great majority of Americans" *especially* when they understand what Nord and Haynes have actually proposed.

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